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ABSTRACT

It has been observed that one historical role of the public library is serving the nation's youth. Current economic and social conditions have created the phenomenon of the "latchkey child"--the school-aged child who has no parent or guardian at home after school hours and has no alternative care arrangement. In light of this, this digest examines the public library's responsibility toward latchkey children, surveys library reactions to unattended children in the libraries, and discusses the importance of library policies that will address this problem. It is noted that while some libraries observe the increasing number of unattended children as an opportunity to improve youth services, others find themselves facing philosophic, economic, and legal dilemmas associated with these latchkey children. It is argued that, as each library comes to understand its role in its unique community there will be a clear focus on where it stands relevant to social dilemmas, and that library professionals must be part of a network of policymakers investigating solutions to problems such as latchkey children. In the meantime, the question of whether libraries should provide service to these children beyond standard user services will continue to be debated. (12 references) (MAB)

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The Library and the Latchkey

ERIC Digest

by

Sari Feldman

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Background

The public library has played a historic role in serving the nation's youth. In the early 1900s, Ann Carol Moore began developing children's services at New York Public Library based on her observation of the needs of young people in New York City. Children's and young adults' services at NYPL and other urban centers grew from the simple provision of library materials and bibliographic instruction to the provision of recreational programming, clubs, browsing rooms and lounges (Braverman, 1979).

Current trends are again influencing youth services in libraries. Economic and social conditions have increased the need for child care services and created the phenomenon of the so-called "latchkey child"--the school-aged child who has no parent or guardian at home after school hours and has no alternative care arrangement (Services to Children Committee, 1988). It is not surprising that great numbers of children are in the public library unattended after school, on school holidays, and during emergency closing days such as snow days. What role do public libraries have to play in providing safe shelter for the nation's children? Where does the library's responsibility to community needs end? Who will provide the after-school services to children if the public library closes its doors?

Library Reactions

Some libraries see the increasing number of children as an opportunity to improve youth services. Film showings, book discussion groups, and homework assistance programs are some of the creative solutions being implemented by public libraries around the country (Dowd, March-April 1989). Greenville (SC) County Library elicited the cooperation of many social service agencies to develop a program teaching self-sufficiency skills to latchkey children. After one year of LSCA (Library Services and Construction Act) funding, the program is now fully funded by the library itself (Chepesiuk, 1987). Vivian Wynn, branch manager of the Mayfield (OH) Regional Public Library sees the after-school group as enabling public library staff to maintain contact with youth and to present this captive audience with attractive materials and programs (Rome, 1990).

Other libraries are facing philosophical, economic, and legal dilemmas associated with children's use of the library (Dowd, July 1989; Mueller, 1987). A 1988 survey of 91 libraries showed that "while librarians perceived that unattended children provide libraries with an opportunity to develop new methods of effectively serving children, the majority also reported adverse situations, such as inappropriate behaviors, patron complaints, delays in closing the library due to unattended children, and lack of seating" (Dowd, March-April 1989, p. 102). Some libraries cope by providing security guards or childcare services (Dowd, March-April 1989). At the Geauga West Library (Chesterland, OH), money from vending machines used by children after school pays for a substitute teacher to act as a monitor (Rome, 1990). Police officers drop in unannounced at the Middlefield (OH) Public Library (Rome, 1990), and prohibiting unattended children is a solution employed in places such as Flagstaff, Arizona and Iowa City, Iowa (DeCandido, 1988; Mueller, 1987).

Examining the Problem of Latchkeys in Libraries

In 1988, the Services to Children Committee of the Public Library Association (PLA) published *"Latchkey Children" in the Public Library: A Position Paper*. This paper was an attempt to gather information about latchkey children in libraries and to make recommendations for public library policy. However, addressing the needs of this special population is complicated by the difficulty in classifying young library users. As the report notes, there are many reasons children go to the library (Services to Children Committee, 1988):

- because they like libraries and library materials, and libraries can meet some of their homework or recreational needs;
- because they live near a library and go there rather than be alone at home;
- because they have been told to use the library as a safe place when a parent or guardian is not available.

It is virtually impossible to distinguish the true latchkey child from any other youthful library user, and the laws of confidentiality and privacy prohibit intrusive behavior by staff (Rome, 1990). In addition to the so-called "latchkey children," there are children who are brought to the library by a parent or guardian and then are left while the parent or guardian uses another part of the library or leaves to go elsewhere.

Some librarians believe that labeling children is unimportant and that all children should have equal access to service regardless of their status. Furthermore, some believe that serving unattended children is advantageous because there are no parental restrictions on materials or information (Dowd, March-April 1989). While protecting these rights, however, the security and safety of children

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are often at risk. The public library is not the safe haven envisioned by many parents, and staff should not act *in loco parentis*. "'People think of the library as a safe place,'" says Mona Stevenson, Assistant Director of the Warren-Trumbull County Public Library (Warren, OH), "'but we've had incidents ranging from flashing to purse snatching. We get the same kind of people you would get at a mall--and most people wouldn't leave their children unattended in that environment'" (Rome, 1990, p. 36).

Setting Policy

Concerns about liability and child safety have led many libraries to develop policies (Mueller, 1987). However, less than one third of 91 libraries surveyed had a written policy specifying procedures for dealing with unattended children or defining acceptable behavior (Dowd, July 1989). Furthermore, it was found that libraries tended to write policies only after experiencing some problem, rather than proactively (Dowd, March-April 1989). In the case of injury to a child while on library property, the lack of written policy jeopardizes staff, children, and the library's administration. Inadequate staffing and building design often make it difficult to monitor children, exacerbating the safety problem (Dowd, July 1989). Policy can promote consistency in the way staff handle problems which may, in turn, reduce the disruptive or problem behavior.

The PLA report also stresses the need for policy, but it cautions that policies should not be written to "absolve the library of any responsibility for children on their own" (Services to Children Committee, 1988). It calls for a policy that gives clear procedures to staff but insists that these policies and procedures must be part of the library's overall effort to work within its community and that staff training be a major component. Dowd (July 1989) also recommends a combination of written policy, staff training, and community involvement to reach a workable solution to the library-latchkey situation.

Herbert White (1990) believes that the latchkey problem should not be assumed by libraries. He cites the PLA work as evidence that librarians tend to trivialize themselves by failing to define a role:

> Is the library's role the provision of shelter? It is if we simply assume that we do for anyone what they came to have us do, that any professional decision-making by librarians is really incidental to a changing set of circumstances we do not control. (p. 105)

Conclusion: The Library Role

As each public library comes to understand its role in its unique community, there will be a clear focus on where it stands relevant to social dilemmas. By developing a mission statement and defining a role, a library chooses its direction and can develop programs and policies accordingly. Library professionals must be part of a network of policymakers investigating solutions to problems such as latchkey children.

The library has an important role to play in providing information about the latchkey problem, in bringing forth literature on community solutions throughout the United States, and in continuing a strong tradition in children's services including after-school programs. Crossover to latchkey projects may occur when a large library provides space for an outside agency to run an after-school program or for a day care center to schedule regular visits to the library. The public library will also need policies to deal with disruptive and unattended children. However, whether the library should provide services to latchkeys beyond standard user services --free access to information, dissemination of varied materials, and public programs that are rooted in library resources--will continue to be debated.

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